

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: *The Glass Castle*

Author: Jeannette Walls

Born c. 1960; daughter of Rex and Rose Marie (an artist) Walls; married John Taylor (a writer). Education: Barnard College, B.A., 1984. Addresses: Home: New York, NY; and Long Island, NY. Agent: c/o Author Mail, Scribner, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

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Career:

Journalist. *New York Magazine*, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1987-93; *Esquire*, New York, NY, gossip columnist, 1993-98; MSNBC.com, gossip columnist, 1998-.

Writings:

Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip, Spike (New York, NY), 2000.
The Glass Castle: A Memoir, Scribner (New York, NY), 2005.

Sidelights:

New York-based writer Jeannette Walls is a popular gossip columnist for magazines such as *New York* and *Esquire*, and online for MSNBC. Her first book, *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, analyzes the role of gossip in media and public perception, and traces its history from the 1950s up through its explosion in the 1990s. The book includes revealing tidbits as well, showing how Walls gained her reputation as a top gossip columnist. Charles Winecoff, writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, remarked that the book "is at its best when detailing the often-ignominious backgrounds of some of today's most ubiquitous news figures." Winecoff added, however, that it "never delivers any real bombshells, and its relentlessly garrulous tone eventually becomes anesthetizing." *Library Journal* contributor Kelli N. Perkins called Walls' book "both an entertaining insider's look and a solid history of gossip." Jonathan Bing, writing for *Variety*, stated that "Walls proves the quintessential insider, and a highly entertaining one at that. Her accounts of dueling Hollywood gossips Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons, tabloid TV icons like Barbara Walters and Geraldo Rivera, and high-flying editrix Tina Brown, lay bare the inner workings of the major gossip outlets in their ongoing efforts to somehow balance dish, cronyism and actual news."

In *The Glass Castle: A Memoir* Walls applies her fascination with people's lives to herself, revealing her own painful, deprived childhood and a life she once viewed as a shameful secret. Told from Walls' point of view as a child, the book describes her alcoholic father and artist mother, parents who seemed more intent on their next adventure than on providing basic necessities for their children. At the age of three, Walls caught her dress on fire while attempting to cook a hotdog because her mother was too busy painting to fix her a meal. The family often skipped town in the dead of night to avoid bill collectors or paying back rent on apartments that lacked heat or running water. When they ended up in Welch, Virginia, the small mining town where Walls' father grew up, the children could add their grandmother's abuse to their list of hardships. At age seventeen, Walls finally



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escaped to New York City with her older sister, and the two struggled to support themselves with jobs in the service industry while living in an apartment in the South Bronx. Eventually, Walls graduated from Barnard College, a degree paid for with scholarships, loans, and her own hard-earned money, then went on to a career in journalism.

The Glass Castle describes not only the hardships Walls overcame, but the guilt associated with improving her lot in life. When her parents moved to New York, they became squatters in lower Manhattan, digging through dumpsters and refusing to acknowledge that they needed assistance, their lives a sharp contrast to Walls' own successful Park Avenue existence. Spectator reviewer Olivia Glazebrook remarked that Walls' memoir "is full of astonishing episodes, but the book is a success beyond its ability to shock. Jeannette Walls...has managed to balance her account with great precision: as she and her siblings did, we must both love and hate her parents." In an *Entertainment Weekly* review of the memoir, Nicolas Fonesca noted, "it's safe to say that none of her scoops could outshine the blunt truths on these pages." Booklist reviewer Stephanie Zvirin commented: "shocking, sad, and occasionally bitter, this gracefully written account speaks candidly, yet with surprising affection." A contributor for *Kirkus Reviews* observed that Walls' "tell-it-like-it-was memoir is moving because it's unsentimental; she neither demonizes nor idealizes her parents, and there remains an admirable libertarian quality about them, though it justifiably elicits the children's exasperation and disgust."

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Karen Valby, Walls explained her reluctance to tell people about her past: "I never set out to deceive anybody," the journalist maintained. "I'm a bad liar. I just didn't want to be 'Oh, the girl with the homeless mom.'"

Further Readings:

Books:

Walls, Jeannette, *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2005.

Periodicals:

Booklist, February 1, 2000, Ilene Cooper, review of *Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*, p. 995; October 1, 2000, Candace Smith, review of *Dish*, p. 367; February 1, 2005, Stephanie Zvirin, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 923.

Columbia Journalism Review, July, 2000, Andie Tucher, review of *Dish*, p. 66.

Entertainment Weekly, March 10, 2000, Charles Winecoff, review of *Dish*, p. 64; March 11, 2005, Nicholas Fonseca, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 107; March 18, 2005, Karen Valby, "Coming up for Air: In Her Blistering New Memoir, *The Glass Castle*, Gossip Columnist Jeannette Walls Dredges up Her Own Long-Buried Secrets and Lies," p. 32.

Kirkus Reviews, December 15, 2004, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 1195.

Library Journal, April 1, 2000, Kelli N. Perkins, review of *Dish*, p. 119; February 15, 2005, Gina Kaiser, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 141.

Newsweek, March 7, 2005, Barbara Kantrowitz, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 55.

People, April 4, 2005, Edward Nawotka, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 45.

Psychology Today, May-June, 2005, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 36.

Publishers Weekly, May 1, 2000, review of *Dish*, p. 32; January 17, 2005, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 41; February 7, 2005, Bridget Kinsella, "Media Flocks to Scribner's *The Glass Castle*," p. 20.

Spectator, April 30, 2005, Olivia Glazebrook, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 38.

Vanity Fair, April, 2005, Jim Windolf, review of *The Glass Castle*, p. 184.

Variety, June 5, 2000, Jonathan Bing, review of *Dish*, p. 31.



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Online:

MSNBC.com, [http:// www.msnbc.com/](http://www.msnbc.com/) (July 16, 2005), Denise Hazlick, review of *The Glass Castle*.

Village Voice Online, <http://www.villagevoice.com/> (July 16, 2005), Joy Press, review of *The Glass Castle*.*

Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online



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Reviews:

Booklist Review: February 1, 2005

Starred Review Walls, who spent years trying to hide her childhood experiences, allows the story to spill out in this remarkable recollection of growing up. From her current perspective as a contributor to MSNBC online, she remembers the poverty, hunger, jokes, and bullying she and her siblings endured, and she looks back at her parents: her flighty, self-indulgent mother, a Pollyanna unwilling to assume the responsibilities of parenting, and her father, troubled, brilliant Rex, whose ability to turn his family's downward-spiraling circumstances into adventures allowed his children to excuse his imperfections until they grew old enough to understand what he had done to them—and to himself. His grand plans to build a home for the family never evolved: the hole for the foundation of the "The Glass Castle," as the dream house was called, became the family garbage dump, and, of course, a metaphor for Rex Walls' life. Shocking, sad, and occasionally bitter, this gracefully written account speaks candidly, yet with surprising affection, about parents and about the strength of family ties—for both good and ill. ((Reviewed February 1, 2005)) Copyright 2005 *Booklist Reviews*.

Library Journal Review: February 15, 2005

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

MSNBC gossip columnist Walls (*Dish: The Inside Story on the World of Gossip*) wants to set the record straight about her background. Writing from a child's perspective, she relates the peripatetic lifestyle of her family, brought on by an alcoholic father and an artist mother who feels that rules and discipline hold people back. Neither parent holds a job for long, which forces the family either to skedaddle when the bills mount up or to move in with in-laws. The kids end up having to fend for themselves, endure the teasing of their schoolmates, sleep on cardboard boxes, and scrounge for food. This is an extreme example of a dysfunctional family, and Walls does not shrink from exposing every detail. With one parental relapse after another, the reader begins to wonder how Walls will break out. Finally, she does so by joining her school newspaper and finding her calling, then moving to New York City to pursue it. Walls, who openly expresses her shame and embarrassment about her parents, seems to have written this memoir to forgive herself for hiding her background. While she may be glad to get it off her chest, the reader is none the better for it. For large public libraries only.—Gina Kaiser, Univ. of the Sciences in Philadelphia Copyright 2005 *Reed Business Information*.

Kirkus Review: December 15, 2004

An account of growing up nomadic, starry-eyed, and dirt poor in the '60s and '70s, by gossip journalist Walls (*Dish*, 2000). From her first memory, of catching fire while boiling hotdogs by herself in the trailer park her family was passing through, to her last glimpse of her mother, picking through a New York City Dumpster, Walls's detached, direct, and unflinching account of her rags-to-riches life proves a troubling ride. Her parents, Rex Walls, from the poor mining town of Welch, West Virginia, and Rose Mary, a well-educated artist from Phoenix, love a good adventure and usually don't take into account the care of the children who keep arriving—Lori, Jeannette, Brian, and Maureen—leaving them largely to fend for themselves. For entrepreneur and drinker Rex, "Doing the skedaddle" means getting out of town fast, pursued by creditors. Rex is a dreamer, and someday his gold-digging tool (the Prospector), or, better, his ingenious ideas for energy-efficiency, will fund the building of his desert dream house, the Glass Castle. But moving from Las Vegas to San Francisco to Nevada and back to rock-bottom Welch provides a precarious existence for the kids—on-and-off schooling, living with exposed wiring and no heat or plumbing, having little or nothing to eat. Protesting their paranoia toward authority and their insistence on "true values" for their children ("What doesn't kill you will make you stronger," chirps Mom), these parents have some dubious nurturing practices, such as teaching the children to con and shoplift. The deprivations do sharpen the wits of the children—leading to the family's collective escape to New York City,



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where they all make good, even the parents, who are content to live homeless. The author's tell-it-like-it-was memoir is moving because it's unsentimental; she neither demonizes nor idealizes her parents, and there remains an admirable libertarian quality about them, though it justifiably elicits the children's exasperation and disgust. Walls's journalistic bare-bones style makes for a chilling, wrenching, incredible testimony of childhood neglect. A pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, thoroughly American story. Agent: Jennifer Rudolph Walsh/William Morris Agency Copyright *Kirkus* 2004 *Kirkus/BPI Communications*. All rights reserved.

Publishers Weekly Review: January 14, 2005

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Freelance writer Walls doesn't pull her punches. She opens her memoir by describing looking out the window of her taxi, wondering if she's "overdressed for the evening" and spotting her mother on the sidewalk, "rooting through a Dumpster." Walls's parents-just two of the unforgettable characters in this excellent, unusual book-were a matched pair of eccentrics, and raising four children didn't conventionalize either of them. Her father was a self-taught man, a would-be inventor who could stay longer at a poker table than at most jobs and had "a little bit of a drinking situation," as her mother put it. With a fantastic storytelling knack, Walls describes her artist mom's great gift for rationalizing. Apartment walls so thin they heard all their neighbors? What a bonus-they'd "pick up a little Spanish without even studying." Why feed their pets? They'd be helping them "by not allowing them to become dependent." While Walls's father's version of Christmas presents-walking each child into the Arizona desert at night and letting each one claim a star-was delightful, he wasn't so dear when he stole the kids' hard-earned savings to go on a bender. The Walls children learned to support themselves, eating out of trashcans at school or painting their skin so the holes in their pants didn't show. Buck-toothed Jeannette even tried making her own braces when she heard what orthodontia cost. One by one, each child escaped to New York City. Still, it wasn't long before their parents appeared on their doorsteps. "Why not?" Mom said. "Being homeless is an adventure." Agent, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh. (Apr.) Copyright 2005 *Reed Business Information*.

MSNBC Review by Denise Hazlick

March 20, 2006

Jeannette Walls spends most of her time digging up dirt on other people's lives. As the gossip columnist for MSNBC.com, Walls tracks down the latest rumors about Britney Spears' marriage, Michael Jackson's peccadilloes and the latest target on the PETA hit list.

But her road to celebrity gossip columnist was tougher than any angry call she'd ever received from an enraged publicist. In her autobiography, released this week by Scribner, Walls reveals a sad and sometimes tragic childhood that few but her closest friends knew about.

In the opening pages of *The Glass Castle*, Walls recalls watching someone else do a little digging, her mother, searching through a garbage dumpster in lower Manhattan. Walls wastes little time unveiling the dichotomy that is her life, a high-profile Park Avenue reporter with a unconventional and often tragic past that followed her from the hollow of West Virginia to Manhattan.

The Glass Castle is a no-holds barred tale of a nomadic, deprived childhood told with the hypnotic wonderment of a child who always wants to believe that Daddy will be a hero in the end and that Momma really does know best. You are enrapt reading about Walls and her siblings rifling through trash cans at school looking for food, doing the skedaddle in the middle of the night, or waiting for Dad to come home after another bender. It's a riveting story and a testament to Walls' indomitable desire to rise above a life that could have easily turned her into just



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another tragic headline.

Walls said she tried for years to recount her colorful childhood.

"I started it before and every time I ended up throwing it away," Walls said. With encouragement from her husband, writer John Taylor, she finally decided to tell the tale. "Writing this story was a little like diving off the high dive—once you're up there you just have to do it," she says.

But even after completing the book, Walls still had some trepidation about how it would be received, by the public, her colleagues and most especially her family.

"I feel like *Alice Through the Looking Glass*," Walls said. "I found out that people are incredibly compassionate and kind. It really changed my view of the world."

From her family, the reviews are mixed. Her brother Brian was very supportive. "He has a steel trap memory so he was good for bouncing things off of," Walls said.

Older sister Lori was not so happy about having her childhood exposed. But according to Walls, she is gradually warming to it and has enjoyed reading it.

Walls' father is deceased now, but her mother has loved the publicity.

Walls tells the story from the point of view of herself as a child, recalling the events as she saw them at each respective age. Scavenger hunts in the desert and late-night escapes from the family's latest town are treated as adventures.

She jumps right in, opening Chapter 2 with a chilling quote: "I was on fire." Just 3 years old Walls watched flames inch up from the hem of her favorite pink dress as she tried to make herself a hot dog.

When asked by the nurses at the hospital why a 3-year-old was cooking, the injured child responds, "Mom says I'm mature for my age and she lets me cook for myself a lot." She passes no judgment on a mother who was so consumed with her latest painting she couldn't be bothered to cook for her child.

To say that Walls' parents were not Ozzie and Harriet would be putting it mildly. Rex Walls was an alcoholic who felt that a mundane life was too constraining for him, but whose big dreams never seemed to come to fruition. The title of the book refers to a great glass house that he was going to build once he made his fortune. Yet despite his all-too-human flaws, Walls never turns him into a monster, rather seeing him as a man she loved and admired while being profoundly disappointed by him.

Her mother, Rose Mary, is a woman who marches to a different drum. A frustrated artist who was not cut out to be the doting mother of four, she hoarded candy bars while her children starved and wouldn't dream of pulling herself away from her art to take a run-of-the-mill job. Later in life, after her children had left her, she was content to live as a squatter in New York, refusing the help of Walls and her siblings.

As the story progresses and an older Walls sees how the world views her and her family, her rose-colored glasses come off. After years of roaming around the desert Southwest, the family eventually moves to their father's family



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home in Welch, West Virginia. Unhappy about returning to a place he initially escaped, Rex sinks deeper into alcoholism as her Rose Mary retreats further into her own world. The children, now entering their teen years, suffer physical and sexual abuse at the hand of their paternal grandmother and ostracism from the folk of the town.

Longing for a better life, at just 17, Walls moves to New York to live with her older sister. She worked part-time jobs to support herself before being admitted to Barnard.

A fledgling journalist since her start on her high school paper in West Virginia, Walls took a gopher job at *New York Magazine* during college. From there she moved to the business section, before heading to *USA Today* as a news reporter. She was lured back to *New York Magazine*, however, to take over its gossip column.

"I was a little insulted at first," Walls said. "I always wanted to be a serious journalist. But I just loved [gossip]. It was such a departure from just taking the news that was fed to you."

She would go on to do a gossip column for *Esquire* magazine before leaving to write *Dish*, a book about the hard-scrabble world of gossip. While working on the book, she heard that MSNBC.com was looking for an online gossip columnist and, in 1999, took her talents to the World Wide Web. But although she's written hundreds of columns, telling her own story was different.

"I was in control of what people thought of me, but I had no control over what they thought of my mother," Walls said. "When I asked my mother, 'how do I tell people about you' her answer was 'tell the truth'. But of course, the truth is never simple."

Denise Hazlick is MSNBC.com's Lead Entertainment Editor

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Reading Group Guide from BookBrowse

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Discussion Questions:

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

1. Though *The Glass Castle* is brimming with unforgettable stories, which scenes were the most memorable for you? Which were the most shocking, the most inspiring, the funniest?
2. Discuss the metaphor of a glass castle and what it signifies to Jeannette and her father. Why is it important that, just before leaving for New York, Jeannette tells her father that she doesn't believe he'll ever build it? (p. 238).
3. The first story Walls tells of her childhood is that of her burning herself severely at age three, and her father dramatically takes her from the hospital: "You're safe now" (p. 14). Why do you think she opens with that story, and how does it set the stage for the rest of the memoir?
4. Rex Walls often asked his children, "Have I ever let you down?" Why was this question (and the required "No, Dad" response) so important for him—and for his kids? On what occasions did he actually come through for them?
5. Jeannette's mother insists that, no matter what, "life with your father was never boring" (p. 288). What kind of man was Rex Walls? What were his strengths and weaknesses, his flaws and contradictions?
6. Discuss Rose Mary Walls. What did you think about her description of herself as an "excitement addict"? (p. 93).
7. Though it portrays an incredibly hardscrabble life, *The Glass Castle* is never sad or depressing. Discuss the tone of the book, and how do you think that Walls achieved that effect?
8. Describe Jeannette's relationship to her siblings and discuss the role they played in one another's lives.
9. In college, Jeannette is singled out by a professor for not understanding the plight of homeless people; instead of defending herself, she keeps quiet. Why do you think she does this?
10. The two major pieces of the memoir—one half set in the desert and one half in West Virginia—feel distinct. What effect did such a big move have on the family—and on your reading of the story? How would you describe the shift in the book's tone?
11. Were you surprised to learn that, as adults, Jeannette and her siblings remained close to their parents? Why do you think this is?
12. What character traits—both good and bad—do you think that Jeannette inherited from her parents? And how do you think those traits shaped Jeannette's life?
13. For many reviewers and readers, the most extraordinary thing about *The Glass Castle* is that, despite everything, Jeannette Walls refuses to condemn her parents. Were you able to be equally nonjudgmental?



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14. Like Mary Karr's *Liars' Club* and Rick Bragg's *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* tells the story of a wildly original (and wildly dysfunctional) family with humor and compassion. Were there other comparable memoirs that came to mind? What distinguishes this book?